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John Schaffer

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: John Schaffer
INTERVIEWER: Robert H. Novak
PROJECT: History of El Paso, UTEP
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

College of Mines, Class of 1920.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; the Mexican Revolution; early days of the College of Mines; the El Paso Natural Gas Company.

30 minutes (1 7/8 tape speed); 16 pages.

John Schaffer
by Robert H. Novak
March 13, 1974

N: Mr. Schaffer, to start off, who don't you just give me a little bit of biographical background--when and where you were born, information along that line.

S: I was born in El Paso in 1899. My folks--my father and mother--had been here about a year or two before I was born. I was born on North El Paso Street. The house is no longer there. My father was a railroad man, an engineer, and he was killed in a wreck in 1901 on the GH&SA, about 190 miles east of here. I grew up, worked, did what I could, and went to school in El Paso. My first school was the Bailey School that was on Montanta Street and later become the Mesa School /now the site of the YMCA/. In between times, /when/ they'd get crowded, I also attended the Sunset School. After I finished school, I went to the El Paso High, which is now part of Hotel Dieu /School of Nursing/ on the corner of Arizona and Kansas Street. Finishing high school, I went to college in the fall of 1915. I was graduated in 1920.

N: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your memories of the Mexican revolutionary period here in El Paso when you were a boy?

S: Well, during the time that I was a boy growing up, I used to carry papers and we sold Extra papers during the Revolution. We used to go down to the yards of the TP Railway, which is located south of the present depot and west of El Paso Street. Behind boxcars we used to watch part of the fighting when they were coming from the north to the south, attacking Juárez at that end. The bullets were quite numerous coming over into the United States. Some of them /would go/ through boxcars. But being children /whose/ parents

didn't know where we were at that time, we watched the battles. (Chuckles)

Later on, when Pershing and the militia all come into El Paso, they had a group that went from here to Colonia Dublán where they were chasing Villa--Pershing and numerous other people. We thought that that was quite a thrill, too. They were hiring people for FWD trucks to drive them down through that sand--it was a terrible road--so I volunteered and went down on one of those trips in an FWD truck into México. Luckily, nothing happened--we just drove down and drove back. During that time, I never saw any activity with Pershing, any combat. I've often wondered if that wasn't a kind of training period for the First World War.

N: How do you remember General Pershing--his appearance and personality?

S: He was a very erect man, and he stood straight; very direct. Of course, I never had any contact with him, only just observed him, but he would snap out orders and he was a West Pointer. There was another man he had with him at that time; his name was Funston, General Funston. It was quite interesting to look back at those days. Of course, we had a number of soldiers of fortune in those days. They had Sam Dreben--he was quite noted around here in El Paso. There were several more.

N: Tracy Richardson?

S: Tracy Richardson, yeah. Quite a bunch of them.

N: Did you ever meet any of them personally?

S: Oh, I knew Sam Dreben, met him several times.

N: What kind of a man was Sam Dreben?

S: Well, he was a little short fellow, and I believe he was of Hebrew descent. Boy, he was just a wild man. (Laughs) The name said it--he was a soldier of fortune. He was, too!

N: Did you ever have an opportunity to meet any of the Mexican revolutionaries, Villa or Orozco or any of those people?

S: Only seeing them, that's all. I've seen Orozco with his arm off. I've watched him, and I've watched Villa and Carranza. But I never met any of them, no.

N: How did people in El Paso at that time view the Mexican Revolution? Where did the people's sympathies lie?

S: There wasn't much sympathy--they just took it in stride. Of course, when they killed all these Americans down at Cumbre Tunnel, there was quite a lot of hatred at that time, they didn't like what they did there. But we were so outnumbered here in El Paso, so small a community, nobody said a whole lot. (Laughs)

N: I understand that Villa and Orozco and some of the other people used to come over to El Paso to buy supplies, go to the Elite Confectionery.

S: That's right--the old Elite on the Corner of Mesa and Texas streets /site of the present W.T. Grant Store/. That was quite a gathering place.

N: That was the big social center for the young people?

S: Yes, it was. That's where they would all wind up. It was a very, very nice little place. And later on the old Modern /Café in the basement of the Mills Building used to be the other /place to go in El Paso.

N: When you finished your high school education, you decided to go on to the College of Mines. What made you decide to go to Mines?

S: Well, it was here. Money, tuition, living at home --there were several things that entered into that. Being in this community down here /with a mining college, I wanted to be a mining engineer. That was part of it.

N: When you first started at the School of Mines, it was still over on the old

site. How do you remember the old School of Mines--what did it look like?

S: There was three buildings: the dormitory, Old Main, and one other little building there. It sat out in the wilderness, it was plumb in the wilderness. I lived on the corner of Kansas and Wyoming Street--my mother had built a home there, or rather a boarding house there, in 1905. It's located right across from Travelodge now. I used to walk up to Boulevard [now Yandell] and take a streetcar to Fort Bliss, go through part of Fort Bliss--the stables and present quarters--and walk over to the School of Mines. [They] were very nice looking buildings, nice architecture in those early days. And I think we had some very capable professors. God knows, they were dedicated, or they never could have made it in those days!

N: Who were some of the professors that you remember?

S: Well, there was, of course, Dean Worrell, Cap Kidd. The professor of Geology was a man by the name of Pallister. We had Barbareno, who taught Spanish, and Tommy Dwyer, who taught Math and Surveying. A man by the name of Seamon was professor of Chemistry and Assaying. Most of these men had been out and proven themselves in work rather than coming right from another school to teach. That was the first of them.

N: You were telling me the story of how Cap Kidd ended up here in El Paso. Could you tell me that again?

S: He had told me that he had had throat trouble. I don't know just what it was; he talked in kind of a hoarse [way]. It might have been TB, but I [won't] say because I don't know. Anyhow, he come into this country and he had a chance to go to work for the Reclamation Service. In those days they were building the Elephant Butte Dam and he was assistant engineer of the construction of the Elephant Butte Dam. That was the way he got out in this country.

He had been a professor at Texas A & M. That's how he got a hold of Dwyer. Dwyer come from there, too--he'd been a student down there. Later Dwyer was chief engineer for Gulf Oil Company.

N: How do you remember Dean Worrell?

S: Very erect, wonderful man. He had the attributes of a gentleman all the way through, and he was an awful nice fellow. I never had him in any courses, but they say he was very, very good.

N: When you first went out to Mines, what was the course of study like? Was there just one course of studies in Mining?

S: Of course, we had English and Spanish and Chemistry and Geology and Math and Surveying, and what have you. It wasn't near as many subjects as there is now, but it was just a general education. In fact, I think that courses that we took in those years, you could fit into most any kind of an engineering job when you got out.

N: I guess there was a lot of opportunity to get practical experience at that time because of the location of the school.

S: That's right; that is right. During the summers, the mining companies and smelters were very nice and they would take all the students in and they would work during the summer in the mines, which most of them did. In fact, there was another boy by the name of Primroy. He went to the School of Mines out here, and he was quite a chemist back in New York. I forget what outfit he was with, but it was a big outfit--he'd become chief chemist there. Several of them made their names in that way--whether it was the times, I don't know. But he was a very nice man.

N: Were you at the School of Mines at the time of the fire that destroyed the Main Building?

- S: Yes, sir, we was there. It was 1916. /In/ the building that burned down, the basement of that used to be where we'd put all out football uniforms, and /we had/ shower baths and lockers, and then we had classes above. When it burned down, all our equipment went up, and everything we had, and of course there was no insurance on it. We all pitched in and had to buy it ourselves, replace out football uniforms. (Laughter) But everybody took it in stride--we met /in/ the dormitories for a short time and then they built some tin buildings for laboratories. It worked out all right--they got things going right quick.
- N: Just after the fire, was there a lot of fear that the school would be closed?
- S: There might have been, but we never was worried about it, because Kidd and Worrell took charge and they got things going. We never had any anticipation of them closing up.
- N: I guess the fire was really the moving force in getting the university out to the new site, then.
- S: That was part of it, yes. The location at that time was in the extremities of El Paso--way out, we'd call it. And now it's way in!
- N: And I guess that the architecture at the new university, the Bhutanese architecture, was really Mrs. Worrell's idea.
- S: That's exactly right. She suggested it and they went for it. I think it's still extremely pretty.
- N: How did that come about? How did she get the idea for this Bhutanese architecture?
- S: By virtue of her being in the Fiji Islands. She was a writer and she'd go over there and spend several months. I imagine that during that /time/ she liked it. Worrell would probably visit her and /he/ liked it, and they

influenced the architects.

- N: Did most of the students like the new architecture, do you think? How was it received?
- S: Everybody liked it in those days--it was very nice. We had the Old Main Building, one dormitory--I don't know what they call it now--and then we had the science building and a power plant and mill. That was the original buildings in the college.
- N: Do you remember, was there a lot of confusion moving out to the new site, or did people move pretty smoothly into the new university?
- S: Oh, yes, they were tickled to death to get in there! (Chuckles) It was in the wilderness too, now. It was off Mesa Avenue, and there wasn't a darn thing up there, no roads or anything. We used to have to walk from the pavement on Mesa by trails to go into the present college.
- N: If students wanted to get into downtown, how did you get to downtown? Was there a streetcar that ran out that way at all?
- S: The best way was to walk. (Laughter) Most people did! No, there wasn't any streetcar.
- N: I guess not too many people had automobiles in those days.
- S: No, good gracious, no! And those that did couldn't afford to run them. Cap, in the old school, used to have a Hupmobile--I never will forget that Hupmobile. It was quite a gadget--it was a nice old car. He used to take it out there and the boys used to hide it on him once in a while, have a little fun. But he was a good-natured fellow with all the boys--never had any trouble at all.
- N: Did the isolation bother the students, the fact of being out there in the wilderness like that? Or did it help create a sort of spirit among the students?

- S: I think it helped. I don't think anybody was worried. Of course, it meant getting out there and getting up early in the mornings, getting home late at night, those that lived in town. Those that lived in the dormitories, it didn't bother them. Of course, we had our football games. With our proximity to Fort Bliss, we used to play the soldiers. It was just very nice out there.
- N: Did most of the students come from other parts of the country and live in the dorms, or would you say that most were from here in El Paso?
- S: Most were from out of town and lived in the dormitories. Those that lived near El Paso stayed in El Paso and commuted out by streetcar and walked across.
- N: How did World War I affect the school? I understand that a lot of students went off and enlisted.
- S: Oh, yes, very many of them went and enlisted. Some of them took off right away--some of them went earlier and some later. Now there was Buster Biggs, he went out there in those days. Biggs Field is named after him. There was Billy Race, who used to play quarterback for us; there was Ronan. Oh, just a bunch of them took off right quick--Russell Worthington and several of them. They took off real quick. Now, I was a little young at that time for that, but I later went into the SATC* that formed up here at the college, and I went through that deal.
- N: Did you stay at the College of Mines all the way through until you graduated?
- S: No, I was one year at the University of Arizona--played football out at Arizona. (Laughs)
- N: Why did you decide to go out there?
- S: Well, a boy by the name of Porter, Carter Porter, wanted me to go over there and play. I went over one year, but I didn't care for it too much. Arizona

*Student Army Training Corps

was fine, but it was away from home and I felt better when I came back.

I came back and told Cap that I wanted to finish up here.

N: What was the social life like at the School of Mines? What did the students do for fun?

S: Well, there wasn't too much fun. Nighttimes they played pitch, penny-ante poker--all the fellows. I'll tell you, it was more studying. We didn't have time to do too much. Everybody was working--they'd have little odd jobs. It was nothing like it is now--just absolutely nothing. Didn't have time for it. Isolation was one of the things, too. It was so damn far in from all these places, they couldn't get there! (Chuckles) They didn't have cars or means of conveyance.

N: You had a couple of girls out there, too, after a while.

S: As I remember, we had a girl by the name of Ruth Brown. Oh, we had a lot of them after that, at the new school. Are you talking about the old school east of El Paso?

N: Yes. According to my notes it was 1916 that the first girls entered, so that would have still been over at the old school.

S: I think it was Ruth Brown and maybe one or two others.* I can't remember their names. But when they opened up over here, west of Mesa, the present school, there were several of them who went out there.

N: Did they fit in pretty well?

S: Oh, yes, they liked it. Some of them were socialites, but they just drifted right in.

N: Guess you guys were glad to have them.

S: Yes, they were glad to have them. And they were serious students--Sarah Bridges, Camille Kibler, Ethel Crawford--oh, several of them. I forget all

* Grace Odell

their names. But they just fit in very good and /they were/ wonderful students. In 1915, there wasn't any girls--that all come /in/ 1916.

N: What happened to most of the graduates in the early days? Did most of them get jobs in the mining industry in México, or did they tend to stay here in this country and get jobs in the Southwest?

S: Most of them went to México. There was more future /with/ the various mines in México. Myself, I had aspirations of going to México. I went to work for the AS & R in the control department, assaying, and I was going down to Aguascalientes. But in the meantime, I didn't care for that routine work of assaying, so I got a chance at another job and I took it. That was the way it worked out. And the result is, I had very /good/ fortune in finding jobs that appealed to me more than the mine.

I'd had my fill of it during school, working in the mines in Arizona, New Mexico, and all over. I was up sampling and assaying in one of the mines when I was going to college, at the Iron Cap Mines north of Globe. That was about the time of the big miners' strike, and they were dumping road plows off on /strikers/ cars, and a few more things. And I decided that I didn't give a damn about that, so I got out /of/ that. (Laughs)

N: Before we move on to something else, are there any other memories you have of the School of Mines that we should talk about--people or activities you were involved in?

S: Well, they had several boys from Fort Bliss, /sons of/ the officers /who/ went out there. I know one boy by the name of Sample, Colonel Sample's son. There was just any number of them that went there, and they were very, very nice fellows. In football, of course, we had a limited team. Our student body wasn't too big, /so/ practically everybody played football and baseball.

No, I can't really remember any real activities that went on out there. I saw the horseplay, though, that the kids put on.

N: I understand that after you graduated, you were involved in forming an alumni club. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

S: Now, I don't remember that, truthfully--I don't remember forming an alumni club, but I know that we had an alumni club here. And we had what they called the M Club, too. That was for Mines.

N: What was the purpose of the M Club?

S: Well, that was the letterman's club. That was formed later on. I don't remember too much on the alumni club. Lots of water under the bridge since then! (Chuckles)

N: Shall we talk about some of the jobs you've had since you graduated?

S: My first job, as I said before, I went to work for the AS & R in the control department. I left there and I had a chance to go to work for El Paso County. I was assistant county engineer in 1921 and '22. I located in those days Mesa Road from Cincinnati Street, which is Kern place, plumb up to the Four Corners the intersection of Mesa and Doniphan. There wasn't a darn thing in there in those days. I also located the Newman Road, which goes out to Newman, Texas, and part of the Carlsbad Road. I was on bridges and what have you, in those days.

Then I went to work for the Boundary Commission in 1924 as assistant engineer to R.E. Fishburn. George Curry was then Commissioner; George Curry used to be governor of the Philippines. I worked for them till 1927. We did the surveying of all the river and the bancos, the elimination of bancos and islands from El Paso to the Gulf. Then we did the overland boundary from El Paso to San Diego. We repaired and replaced all the monuments in

those days. So I had a varied experience with the Boundary Commission.

N: Was that an international commission?

S: Yes, the International Boundary Commission. R.E. Fishburn was chief engineer, I was under him. I had charge of all the field work.

From there I went down to San Luís Potosí with the AS & R as a plant engineer, building the plant, smelter, and part of the houses. I didn't stay down there too long. They were having that religious war down in there, and I didn't care much about México in those days, so I pulled out of México and come back up here. Then, in the First National Bank Building, I went up to see a boy by the name of Steve Latimer, who was a lawyer at that time, an old boy that I knew very well. And I passed by and saw the El Paso Natural Gas Company on the same floor. I decided to just go in and talk to them. I went in, and Mr. Kayser and Mr. Frost, who were then at the place--I asked them for a job. Miss March, by the way, had gone to work the day before. When I went in to ask for a job, Mr. Frost talked to me and took me in to Mr. Kayser, the president. He hired me; I pulled of my coat and went to work.

We was trying to get a franchise in El Paso. I started laying out gas lines in El Paso before they got the franchise. Later on they got the franchise. Then they wanted me to start surveying one day. They told me to start at Jal, New Mexico, in the eastern part, and to run a survey into El Paso for this gas line. They asked if I could do it and I said, "Yeah, I can do it." So, that day I got the first Model A Ford that hit El Paso from Bob Falk, who was running the Ford agency here. I started out in that car out of Jal, New Mexico, and the sand was so bad I finally got a mule team and hooked them onto the front of the Ford. We finally got the survey to the Pecos River,

and then from the Pecos River we worked into El Paso. By that time they called me in the office and I put four more parties on. We finally worked the survey into El Paso.

At the time I finished the survey, Smith Brothers were building the line and they wanted me to go in with Smith Brothers. I went to work with them; they loaned me to Smith Brothers and I went to work for Smith Brothers. One of the men there was P.B. Keller, brother to the blind girl.* He was the superintendent. I was doing engineering, construction, and what have you. That was, by the way, some of the first electric welding that had been done on pipelines. We got into El Paso and then I went back into the Gas company, and later on we went west. I was with them for a long time, doing numerous things--engineering, construction, and pipelines.

N: How do you remember Mr. Kayser and Mr. Frost of the Gas Company?

S: Oh, they were wonderful men. Mr. Kayser was dynamic. I used to ride with him in the countryside, going over to Arizona. We was looking for gas "loads" sales. He was just really a promoter. Mr. Frost was very much of a manager. I don't know just what part he played, but he was the general manager. They were just wonderful people. They were dynamos, though, I'll tell you that. You worked! There wasn't any eight hours a day!

N: How did the people of the city of El Paso respond to the Gas Company? Was there a lot of suspicion or was it well received?

S: No, they all wanted it. We had been burning artificial gas here in El Paso for a long time--El Paso Gas Company--and when they voted it in, they just wanted the gas in here. It was the godsend at that time, In those days I know Mr. Kayser told them our office would be here and we'd work from here on--and we're still here in El Paso. He's never moved it. They've all

*Helen Keller

threatened lots of times to go to Houston, but as long as he lives I don't think they'll ever move it.

N: Do you remember anything about El Paso politics at that time that you'd like to talk about?

S: Not at that time. But when I was working for the county, it was quite some politics. They wanted who they wanted--they used to load their voters in the back of trucks and pile them in and vote who they wanted in.

N: Were voters brought over from México at that time?

S: Well, no, but there were plenty of them over here that they could load into trucks. (Laughter) It was all right. I don't know that there was too much crookedness going on. It wasn't as lucrative as it is now, but it wasn't the best politics in the world. However, we did have some wonderful men at that time. Later on when Tom Lea got in and the judge--Thomason--they were very good men. Can't say anything against any of them. But the politics wasn't the best in the world.

N: Were you here during the period when the KKK was involved in the school board and the election for mayor?

S: Yes, sir, I was here. It was quite a little thing in those days. They'd get out to the edge of town and light the crosses, raise cain and this and that. It wasn't the best thing in the world, I'll tell you that.

N: It was mostly directed, I guess, in this part of the country against Catholics, who were predominantly Mexican.

S: I think that was it, and the schools. The main thing was that they wanted to hold the schools down. They didn't want to mix religions in the schools, which was their business. I never got mixed up in all that, I'll tell you!

N: Are there any other personal experiences that you've had that you want to tell

me about--job experiences or anything?

S: When I was with the Gas Company, I got lots of them, I'll tell you that-- Indian reservations, crossing all the frontiers of the Southwest. We covered many, many miles. During that time I was up in Canada, I was up in the northern parts of Canada and all through the Northwest. It's virgin country, and it was very interesting. I don't regret any of it at all.

N: Were you up there looking for sources of gas?

S: Yes. Of course, Mr. Kayser was in various deals. Up in Canada they had the Western Natural Gas. They finally sold out; it's now Pacific Petroleum. I know Mr. Kayser started a line from Kettleman Fields in California west of Fresno into Richmond up in that section. I went up and run a survey from Kettleman Fields to Richmond, California. He was buying right-of-way and the California Commission wouldn't let him in. But later on it become the PG & E--that's the PG & E line. So really, Kayser has history behind him in all this country--he started lots of things.

N: I guess that pretty well wraps it up for now. Thank you very much, Mr. Schaffer.

S: You're welcome.

NOTES ON CONVERSATION WITH MR. SCHAFFER, MARCH 28, 1974

Regarding the FWD trucks, Mr. Schaffer states that drivers were recruited in El Paso to carry supplies to Colonia Dublán for distribution to Pershing's troops. The drivers were paid almost nothing for this work, acting more in the capacity of civilian volunteers.

Mr. Schaffer also tells an interesting anecdote regarding Cap Kidd. Just after moving to the new school site, Kidd walked into a class of students awaiting an exam with a surveyor's transit in a bucket -- in pieces. The exam consisted of making a survey of the campus and then preparing a map based on that survey. Of course, before the survey could be done, the students had to reassemble the transit from the various pieces!

Regarding the elimination of bancos by the International Boundary Commission, Mr. Schaffer says that, according to treaty, all such pieces of land formed by evulsive (rapid) changes in the course of the river which had less than 200 inhabitants or an area of less than 250 hectares would become a part of the country to which the land attached itself. Pieces of land larger in area or population would remain with the original country. Thus the Córdova Island remained with México despite the fact that the river ran to the south of it.